

Opening Statement of the Honorable John Shimkus
Chairman, Subcommittee on Environment
“Air Quality Impacts of Wildfires: Mitigation and Management Strategies”
September 13, 2018

(As prepared for delivery)

A year ago, we took testimony to examine the air quality impacts of wildfires, with a focus on stake holder perspectives. Given the Committee’s jurisdiction over air quality policies and public health, the goal then, as it is today, was to develop a better understanding of the health impacts of wildfires and what should be done to minimize those impacts.

We return to the topic this afternoon, to look closer at the mitigation and management strategies for reducing the air quality risks from wildfire smoke. In large part, these strategies involve efforts to reduce the intensity and frequency of wildfires that threaten communities.

The strategies also involve managing the inevitable smoke impacts, whether from wildfires or from what is known as prescribed burning. And they involve ensuring that effective actions are credited appropriately in air quality planning, air quality monitoring, and compliance activities, so states and localities are not punished for taking action that will improve public health.

Last year, some 10 million acres were burned in the United States by wildfires, the second worst fire season since 1960. As of last week, this fire season has resulted in more than 7 million acres burned, with acute impacts of smoke lingering for extended periods of time, throughout California and the Pacific Northwest.

The urgency for reducing the severity of these fires is underscored by news reports—and reports from this Committee’s own members, including Chairman Walden—of the impacts of wildfire smoke. This smoke can smother communities with high levels of particulate matter and other respiratory irritants. These levels, which are many-fold over normal air quality, intensify asthma and chronic pulmonary diseases, and impact the daily lives of millions of people.

Against this backdrop, our panel of witnesses can speak to the complex set of strategies that are needed to more effectively address wildfires and smoke risks.

We will hear today from two state foresters, who oversee and implement fire management strategies in their states. Sonya Germann, from the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and Tom Boggus, the Texas State Forester and Director of the Texas A&M Forest Service. While the general approaches among state forestry officials to mitigating risks are consistent, there are regional differences that affect what is put into practice and can inform future policymaking.

We will hear a state air quality perspective. Mary Anderson, who is with the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, can help us understand the practical challenges of managing wildfire smoke, and how her agency works to address air quality risks.

Collin O'Mara, President of the National Wildlife Federation, brings an environmental perspective but also experience as the former head of the State of Delaware's Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control.

And finally, we will hear from Oregon State Senator Herman Baertshiger, from southern Oregon, who has extensive experience in forestry and wildland firefighting. I'm looking forward to his perspective on what to do, and his perspective on the impacts of wildfires on his constituents.

Let me welcome the panelists. I look forward to understanding the challenges and opportunities you face, and what we can do to ensure our federal air regulations accommodate these strategies.